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UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

Report of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency on its first session

held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
from 16 to 20 November 1992

UNITED NATIONS

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Geneva

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New York, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency, established in accordance with paragraph 79 of the Cartagena Commitment, held its first session at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, from 16 to 20 November 1992. In the course of the session, the Ad Hoc Working Group held two plenary meetings. 1/

Opening statements

2. The Chairman drew attention to the conjunction of two separate forces - global and institutional - which had come together thus creating a unique opportunity in the field of trade efficiency. Globally there were signs of an end to recession, the first fruits of structural adjustment were being realized and the pace of trade and investment was quickening. Since 1950, trade had grown from US$ 61 billion to nearly US$ 3.5 trillion in 1990. This growth had had a positive effect on development. The increasing importance of foreign direct investment, transnational corporations, the role of the global equities investor and the gross volume of trade all showed that globalization was already a fact of life. Ways must be found for the medium- and small-scale exporter to share fully in the world market opportunities. Institutionally, a revitalized UNCTAD had been imbued with a new spirit of cooperation for development. The Cartagena Commitment forged at UNCTAD VIII was not only a statement of determination to support certain ideals but also reflected the new opportunities for cooperation now possible because of political, social and economic changes around the world. The programme of work which the Ad Hoc Working Group would draw up in the course of its session should increase countries' trading capacities because trade efficiency was the "spark plug" igniting the engines of economic growth. Through trade efficiency, the techniques of paperless business transactions in commerce and government were being transformed for the benefit of all enterprises in all countries. By spreading the use of such techniques, UNCTAD could offer members a unique opportunity to gain market access, assure greater global competitiveness and transfer technology. The task before the Ad Hoc Working Group was threefold: (a) to determine a work programme or plan of action; (b) to set in motion measures to create a global network for a Trade Point centre; and (c) to start preparations for an international symposium on trade efficiency, to be held in the fall of 1994. This symposium would allow the Working Group to share its cumulative knowledge and experience with the world.

3. The Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD stressed the importance of the presence at the current session of experts, academics and representatives from the private sector as being an illustration of promising new methods of work. He called attention to the spirit of close and fruitful cooperation with other United Nations bodies that characterized the approach of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency, citing in this regard the involvement of the Economic Commission for Europe's Working Party 4, which constituted one of the pillars of trade efficiency, as well as the jointly organized meeting with the International Trade Centre, planned to take place during the session. Trade flows had been increasingly marked by globalization, strategic alliances between enterprises and the creation of global information networks. In this context, the focus of the international community must be on assuring that the enterprises of every country could participate fully in international trade, as it was the instrument of development and transition towards an open global

economy. To this end, UNCTAD proposed taking steps to reduce the cost of trade transactions by $75 billion annually up to the year 2000, to create new trade links and to integrate small- and medium-sized enterprises into global trade. These goals could not be realized without the active support of the private sector which held the key to revitalizing international trade. In the course of the session, representatives from private enterprise would be called upon to describe their proposed solutions. The International Symposium on Trade Efficiency, planned for 1994, was expected to offer an unprecedented forum in which to evaluate solutions for rendering international trade more efficient as well as for assessing the models or guidelines for integrating developing countries, economies in transition and the small- and medium-sized enterprises of all the countries around the world into the development process. However, the immediate task of the Group was to establish a programme of work. It would also be expected to draw up an agenda for its second meeting, consider the possibility of setting up expert groups to deal with specific subjects and prepare for the 1994 symposium.

4. The Chief of the Special Programme on Trade Efficiency outlined the main goals of the programme: first to reduce transaction costs and secondly to increase participation in international trade. The means to achieve this was advanced information technology. UNCTAD's work in the field of trade efficiency through the Ad Hoc Working Group and through the Trade Points would culminate in the 1994 Symposium on Trade Efficiency. The work of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE-WP4), on trade facilitation and electronic data interchange (EDI), and of the International Trade Centre (ITC), on trade promotion were examples of activities of particular relevance to the Ad Hoc Working Group. A main thrust of the activities of the Ad Hoc Working Group would be to allow exchanges of experience between participants, identification of areas where the work of other bodies could be profitably complemented and mobilization of expertise in the relevant areas.

Chapter I

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORK PROGRAMME OF THE WORKING GROUP

(Agenda item 3)

5. For its consideration of this item, the Ad Hoc Working Group had before it the following documentation:

"Issues and timetable: note by the UNCTAD secretariat" (TD/B/WG.2/2)

6. At its 1st plenary meeting, on 16 November 1992, the Ad Hoc Working Group decided to discuss agenda item 3 in informal meetings.

7. At its 2nd (closing) plenary meeting, on 20 November 1992, the Ad Hoc Working Group adopted the draft programme of work contained in TD/B/WG.2/L.2. For the text of the programme of work, see annex II.

Chapter II

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2ND (CLOSING) PLENARY MEETING

A. Action by the Ad Hoc Working Group on agenda item 3

8. At the Ad Hoc Working Group's 2nd (closing) plenary meeting on 20 November 1992, the Chairman introduced an agreed draft Programme of Work (TD/B/WG.2/L.2).

9. At the same meeting, the Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency adopted its Programme of Work as amended (annex II).

B. Concluding statements

10. The Chairman said that the cooperation and dedication shown in the negotiations on the Programme of Work had reconfirmed a clear commitment to the spirit of Cartagena. She stressed, however, that while the Programme had been devised with a view to what should be feasible in terms of financial resources, personnel and commitment on the part of member countries, organizations, the secretariat and other groups working together, its implementation would be dependent on resources. In this connection, the close cooperation initiated during the session with the Economic Commission for Europe's WP-4 and with the International Trade Centre could profitably be increased so that all bodies devoted to the same issue but pursuing different aspects could provide the kind of cohesive, unified assistance needed by member States to increase world trade. The extensive and ambitious Programme of Work, crafted and structured progressively on the understanding that there was a commitment to make every effort to find the resources necessary, was in essence, a "wish list". The negotiations on the Programme of Work had marked the beginning of a new era of cooperation. The series of projects to be undertaken constituted an unprecedented effort for UNCTAD, both in terms of the dimensions and the level of technicality. The energy, vision and high-quality work of the secretariat had been reflected in the innovations. The presentations during the session had offered a glimpse into the potential of trade efficiency in terms of what it could do for member countries. Adoption of the challenging Programme of Work illustrated the extent of cooperation not only among the member countries but also between international organizations. While the task ahead was vast, its realization would make a difference in the world. The work was urgent: with the new technology, new methods of trading were rapidly being introduced and it was important that no country be left behind in this regard. However, in order to achieve the objectives set out in the Programme of Work, everyone would have to make an effort to find the necessary funding.

11. The Chairman invited delegations to evaluate the procedure followed during the session. Some features had clearly been more useful than others, she believed. Hence, it was important to make a forthright assessment. For instance, the wide array of equipment demonstrated and the specialized terminology used might have made it difficult for those who did not have a firm grasp of the applications to see the whole picture. For this reason, an earlier introduction to the overall interlinkages of the Trade Point centres, for example, might have helped in understanding why new technology was needed.

This might perhaps have also forestalled concerns that some of the informal presentations had seemed too commercial. In opening the discussion on this evaluation, she assured the delegates that they should be candid in their assessments.

12. The spokesman for the European Economic Community (United Kingdom) congratulated the Chairman on the successful outcome and the efficient manner in which the work had been carried forward. He also commended the secretariat for the support given to the members of the Working Party, noting that despite a concern at the outset over the approach taken, the results achieved had allayed the apprehension felt and, in sum, the session had been very courageous and innovative.

13. The spokeswoman for the Group of 77 (Venezuela) said that her Group had not yet had time to make an assessment along the lines suggested. While it had proved difficult to absorb all the presentations made in the course of the session, nevertheless, it had been a worthwhile and constructive experience and her Group fully supported the work which would be accomplished over the next two years.

14. The representative of Canada voiced support for the statement made by the United Kingdom on behalf of the European Economic Community regarding the conduct of the meeting. It had been an admirable, convenient and economical way to expose the maximum number of people to technological advances in communications technology. With regard to the commercialization aspect, it was inevitably difficult to maintain the delicate balance between generic presentations and commercial input. If a similar approach were envisaged for the next session, so as to allow more time for discussion of individual efforts, it might be preferable to have fewer presentations within each section. Canada would support similar initiatives in future.

15. The representative of China expressed interest in the new innovative format of the meetings. With regard to the documentation, however, some vital information had unfortunately been made available in English and French only. Likewise, for certain informal meetings on the Programme of Work, the absence of interpretation services had meant that this work had suffered. It was important to be able to give full attention to substantive matters.

16. The representative of the Russian Federation said that the concerns and problems of his country had been reflected in the document adopted. Indeed, all six elements in the Programme of Work were not only of great interest but also of real practical significance. As for assessing the organizational format followed for the current session, the innovative approach had proved effective: the experts who had addressed the informal meeting had been able to describe state-of-the-art technology. The secretariat had demonstrated great effectiveness in the organization of the work. The approach taken had been satisfactory to Russia.

17. The representative of France, associating his comments with those of the delegation of China, supported the view that documentation should be made available in all official languages and that the same observation applied to simultaneous interpretation.

18. The representative of Cuba voiced appreciation for the Chairman's frank and constructive method of work which had permitted positive results despite the atypical character of the session. Beneficial information had been offered on electronic data processing and the Trade Points, which could be incorporated into other UNCTAD and ITC programmes. He also referred to the application of the ASYCUDA Programme in Cuba and its relative low cost. The problems with interpretation had posed some difficulty, however.

19. The representative of Germany announced that not only had the Working Group on Trade Efficiency agreed on its Programme of Work, but also on the same day a breakthrough had been made in the Uruguay Round: the United States of America and the European Economic Community had reached an agreement on a major issue.

20. The Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD observed that the Working Group on Trade Efficiency had had extremely rich debates where an abundant flow of information was shared. Having got off to such a rapid start, it was important, however, not to slacken the momentum. He expressed confidence that under the Chairman's leadership the rhythm of work of the Group would be maintained.

Chapter III

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

A. Opening of the session

21. The first session of the Ad Hoc Working Group was opened on 16 November 1992 by the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD.

B. Election of officers

(Agenda item 1)

22. At its 1st plenary meeting on 16 November 1992, the Ad Hoc Working Group elected its officers as follows:*

Chairman:	Mrs. E. Shelton	(United States of America)
Vice-Chairmen:	Mr. A.-R. Al Sohaibani	(Saudi Arabia)
	Mr. E. Dreyfous	(France)
	Mr. M. Kisiri	(United Republic of Tanzania)
	Mr. A. Moschini	(Argentina)
	Mr. A. Filippov	(Russian Federation)
Rapporteur:	Mr. A. Brahime	(Morocco)

C. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work

(Agenda item 2)

23. The spokesman for the European Economic Community (United Kingdom) and the representative of the Russian Federation expressed concern that the timetable proposed by the secretariat might not allow the Working Group to discuss its work programme until the very end of the session.

24. The Chairman proposed that the format suggested be tried and revised if necessary in the course of the session.

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* In accordance with the decision taken by the Trade and Development Board at the first part of its thirty-ninth session, the officers elected at the first session of the Ad Hoc Working Group are to remain in office for the duration of the life of the Working Group.

25. At its 1st plenary meeting on 16 November 1992, the Ad Hoc Working Group adopted its provisional agenda (TD/B/WG.2/1) as follows:

1. Election of officers
2. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work
3. Establishment of the work programme of the Working Group
4. Provisional agenda for the second session of the Working Group
5. Other business
6. Adoption of the report of the Working Group to the Board.

26. The Working Group agreed that the invited participants from non-governmental organizations other than those having status with UNCTAD could, on the basis of paragraph 84 of the Cartagena Commitment, take part in an advisory capacity in the meetings.

D. Provisional agenda for the second session of the Working Group

(Agenda item 4)

27. At its 2nd plenary meeting on 20 November 1992, the Ad Hoc Working Group adopted the draft provisional agenda for its second session (TD/B/WG.2/L.3). For the text of the provisional agenda, see annex I.

E. Other business

(Agenda item 5)

28. There were no points raised under this agenda item during the session.

F. Adoption of the report of the Working Group to the Board

(Agenda item 6)

29. At its 2nd (closing) plenary meeting on 20 November 1992, the Ad Hoc Working Group adopted the draft report of its first session (TD/B/WG.2/L.1) and authorized the Rapporteur to complete the final text as appropriate.

Note

1/ For the terms of reference of the Ad Hoc Working Group, see Trade and Development Board decision 398 (XXXVIII), annex, Section C.

Annex I

PROVISIONAL AGENDA FOR THE SECOND SESSION

1. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work
2. Facilitating trade
3. First evaluation of the Trade Point programme
4. Preparatory work for the international symposium on trade efficiency
5. Provisional agenda for the third session of the Working Group
6. Other business
7. Adoption of the report of the Working Group to the Board

Annex II

PROGRAMME OF WORK OF THE AD HOC WORKING GROUP ON TRADE EFFICIENCY*

1. Pursuant to a New Partnership for Development: the Cartagena Commitment, adopted at the eighth session of the Conference, the Ad Hoc Working Group agreed, on the basis of Board decision 398 (XXXVIII) which sets out in annex C the terms of reference of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency, the following work programme.

2. With the aim of fostering greater participation in international trade, in particular by small and medium-sized enterprises, giving special attention to countries and regions less advanced in the area of trade efficiency, the Working Group will work in the following six main areas:

A. Information flows to build trade efficiency

In this area, the Working Group will:

(a) Identify the type of information available and further information needed, including the sources and means of access to such information, to make countries more trade-efficient;

(b) Consider ways to enable countries and enterprises to access, use, maintain and update the information they need in the most cost-efficient fashion, including methods to identify better local users' needs;

(c) Explore ways to foster transparency in trade-related information flows, giving due consideration to confidentiality requirements as well as attempting to identify areas of agreement;

(d) Consider ways to promote the involvement of new users, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, in information networks, and the use of regional information systems.

B. Facilitating trade

In this area, the Working Group will:

(a) Identify and promote ways to rationalize trade procedures and simplify and standardize information requirements. The work of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) WP4 and other relevant bodies will be taken into account. Possibilities of reducing transaction costs should be identified;

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* Adopted by the Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency, at its 2nd (closing) plenary meeting, on 20 November 1992.

(b) Study the problems linked to the need for adequate information and telecommunication infrastructure as a necessary condition for trade efficiency, including open access, installation, operation and training in order to build local capacity;

(c) Cooperate with UNECE WP4 to promote greater awareness, understanding and use of Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), including the standards established through WP4 and the business practices necessary for the use of EDI, with special emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises and, more generally, new players in international trade.

C. Working towards trade efficiency: the role of Governments

In this area, the Working Group will:

(a) Study ways in which the legal, regulatory and administrative environment can be improved so as to allow greater national efficiency including a recommendation for model laws to support greater participation in global commerce using electronic techniques;

(b) Examine how the interface between the government and the private sector, on the one hand, and the regulatory aspects of sectoral linkages (e.g. banks or transport), on the other hand, can best satisfy the requirements of trade efficiency.

D. Trade points

UNCTAD will provide assistance to the member countries in implementing a pilot "Trade Point" programme which shall be based on the use of international standards designed with a view towards open systems necessary for their interconnection. The Trade Points will ensure equal opportunity of access for interested trade partners. Such assistance will include:

(a) Establishment and operation of pilot Trade Points

(i) Identification of pilot Trade Points;

(ii) Identification of the elements needed for international/regional cooperation between national Trade Points;

(iii) Assistance to each pilot Trade Point so as to determine:

- functional options;
- technical requirements;
- funding requirements;
- training requirements;

(b) Evaluation

(i) Evaluate the pilot Trade Points and their effectiveness and efficiency in terms of:

- creating awareness of the potential benefits;
- overcoming obstacles to their effectiveness and efficiency;
- meeting the needs of users, especially small and medium-sized enterprises;
- cost-effectiveness and efficiency;
- involving supporting sectors such as banking, transport, telecommunications, insurance and customs;
- building cooperation and linkages at the regional and international levels;
- meeting the training requirements of the Trade Point operators and users;

(ii) Evaluate efficiency in the use of UNCTAD assistance.

(c) Recommendations

Develop recommendations for future Trade Point programme functionality, set-up, operations, training and funding.

E. Technical assistance

(a) Capacity-building with special emphasis on training and infrastructure, including in cooperation with WP4, the development of educational materials on trade facilitation and EDI; assistance in the training of national trade-facilitation and EDI experts; assistance in the establishment of national trade-facilitation organizations; and expert advice in dealing with specific facilitation in relation to EDI implementation problems;

(b) Consideration of suitable means whereby regional institutions actively engaged in trade information activities can assist in implementing the work programme within the regions;

(c) Development of suitable training programmes for technical assistance;

(d) Facilitation of workshops and the 1994 Symposium.

F. 1994 Symposium

The Working Group in consultation with the Secretary-General of UNCTAD shall prepare the 1994 United Nations international symposium on trade

efficiency, as called for in paragraphs 157 and 158 of the Cartagena Commitment. For use at that time, the Working Group may undertake research, prepare publications, explanatory or educational materials, including those that emphasize legal or other foci.

The Ad Hoc Working Group on Trade Efficiency requests the Chairman to undertake with members of UNCTAD, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD and relevant organizations, consultations on the date and venue of the 1994 United Nations international symposium on trade efficiency and to report the outcome to the second session of the Ad Hoc Working Group.

* * * * *

Resources and working methods

The Secretary-General of UNCTAD is invited:

(a) to carry out an assessment of the workload and the financial implications of each activity included in the work programme with a view to formulating proposals, to identify the need for additional funding and to encourage voluntary extrabudgetary contributions and make every effort to provide details of the results of the assessment to Member States, in conformity with United Nations procedures, in advance of the meetings of the Working Party on the Medium-term Plan and the Programme Budget in March 1993;

(b) to establish a core advisory group of experts constituted according to the procedure for electing the Bureau of the Ad Hoc Working Group. This group will meet periodically with the secretariat to advise and assist in carrying out the work programme in accordance with the decisions of the Ad Hoc Working Group. In addition the Secretary-General will request from member States recommendations to develop a roster of experts. These additional experts will be invited to participate, as appropriate, in the meetings of the core advisory group of experts depending upon the subject under discussion.

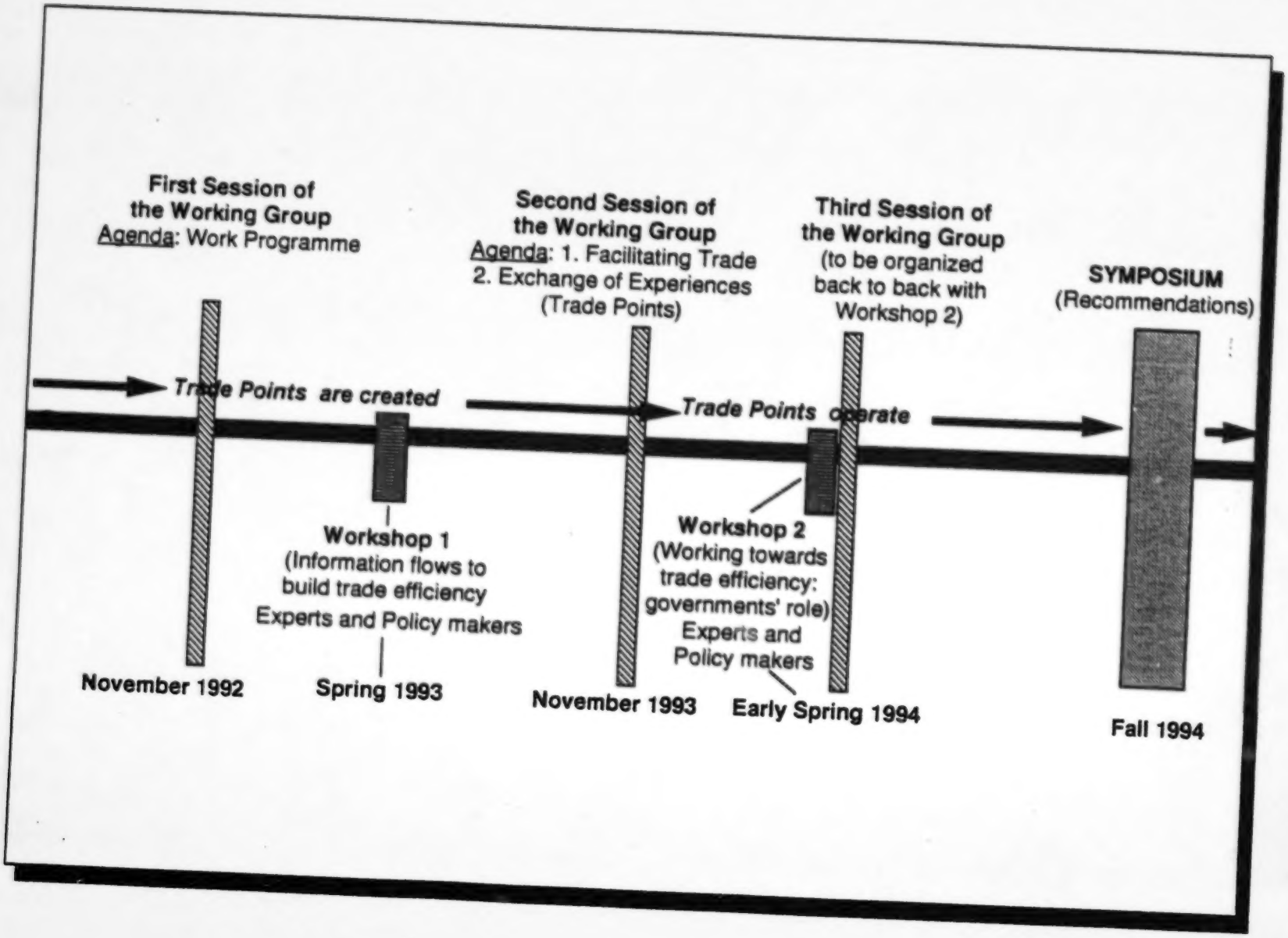
Practical organization

1. It is proposed that element A above (Information flows to build trade efficiency) be the subject of a workshop in the course of Spring 1993, and that element C (Working towards trade efficiency: the role of Governments) be the subject of a workshop in early 1994.

2. Element B (Facilitating trade) would be the first item on the agenda of the second session of the Ad Hoc Working Group, to be held in November 1993; the second item on that agenda would consist of a first assessment of the work done at the Trade Point.

3. It is understood that all elements of this work (meetings of the Ad Hoc Working Group, workshops and work at the Trade Points) would converge on the formulation of recommendations for the 1994 Symposium.

This timetable is summarized in the following diagram.


First Session of
the Working Group
Agenda: Work Programme
Second Session of
the Working Group
Agenda: 1. Facilitating Trade
2. Exchange of Experiences
(Trade Points)
Third Session of
the Working Group
(to be organized
back to back with
Workshop 2)
SYMPOSIUM
(Recommendations)
Trade Points are created
Trade Points operate
Workshop 1
(Information flows to
build trade efficiency
Experts and Policy makers
Workshop 2
(Working towards
trade efficiency:
governments' role)
Experts and
Policy makers
November 1992
Spring 1993
November 1993
Early Spring 1994
Fall 1994

Annex III

MEMBERSHIP AND ATTENDANCE a/

1. The following States members of UNCTAD, members of the Ad Hoc Working Group, were represented at the session:

Algeria
Argentina
Australia
Bangladesh
Benin
Brazil
Canada
Chile
China
Colombia
Cuba
Czechoslovakia
Denmark
Egypt
France
Germany
Ghana
Greece
Hungary
India
Indonesia
Iran (Islamic Republic of)
Italy
Japan
Lebanon
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya
Madagascar
Malta
Mauritania
Mauritius
Mexico
Morocco
Myanmar
Netherlands
Nigeria
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Republic of Korea
Romania
Russian Federation
Saudi Arabia
Senegal
Singapore
Sri Lanka
Sweden
Switzerland
Tunisia
Turkey
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
United Republic of Tanzania
United States of America
Uruguay
Venezuela
Zimbabwe

2. The following other States members of UNCTAD, not members of the Ad Hoc Working Group, were represented as observers at the session:

Afghanistan
Austria
Belgium
Bulgaria
El Salvador
Equatorial Guinea
Ethiopia
Finland
Gabon
Iraq
Ireland
Israel
Malaysia
Nepal
Panama
Peru
Philippines
Qatar
Spain
Viet Nam
Zaire

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a/ For the list of participants, see TD/B/WG.2/INF.1.

3. The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law and the Economic Commission for Europe were represented at the session. The International Trade Centre UNCTAD/GATT was also represented at the session.

4. The following specialized agencies were represented at the session:

World Bank;
International Monetary Fund.

5. The following intergovernmental organizations were represented at the session:

European Economic Community;
League of Arab States.

6. The following non-governmental organizations were represented at the session:

General Category

Ibero-American Association of Chambers of Commerce;
International Chamber of Commerce;
International Express Carriers Conference;
World Federation of United Nations Associations.

Special Category

Airlines' Worldwide Telecommunications and Information Services.

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